

December 25, 2005

To: Mr. Gary L. Porter,
Regional Historic Preservation Officer for GSA's National Capital Region

From: Emily Tuckerman Allen, M.A. LMT
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Section 106 Comments Regarding Certain Murals in Ariel Rios Building

As a consulting party on the 106 Process with reference to the Ariel Rios murals, and particularly with reference to the Frank Mechau murals, I have a few comments to offer. First a word regarding my perspective on the matter.

My relations with Native Americans and the Lakota people in particular go back well into the past and are very much alive at present. I owe this in part to my own inclinations, but also in considerable measure to the heritage from my parents whose commitment to the Lakota people was life-long. My father, Dr. Henry F. Allen, Harvard Professor of Ophthalmology and eye surgeon, lent his services numerous times at the health service at Pine Ridge. His proudest honor—one among many honors received, was being recognized by the then Sioux Chief in a naming ceremony in which he was dubbed “Wambli Ishta”, (“Eagle Eye”). Just a week ago in my home I hosted a Lakota healer, Zantkala (Peter Catches), and his wife. We will be working together on creating a school to pass on the skills and techniques of this 38th generation healer to future generations of his people and others as well. I have other personal experience with North American Indians and I have lived for 25 years abroad and have been deeply involved with Native peoples elsewhere, particularly the Shipibo and Shuar of the Upper Amazon, as well. I speak, therefore, from intimate connection with Natives and their concerns.

At the same time, I have a perspective appreciative of the historical and artistic significance of the Mechau murals. I first discovered the art work of Frank Mechau as a high school student in Colorado, and have held it in high esteem ever since, so you may take it for granted that I recognize the Mechau murals as significant art and worthy of preservation and public access. I will not argue this point, as others have made it compellingly and eloquently in this Process. I also have the perspective of a white woman and a feminist.

My position is that, in view of the importance of these art works and the concerns raised about them, we must put our heads together to come up with a just solution to this stalemate. While taking into full consideration the sensibilities of Lakota and other Native Nationals, and of women, I believe that there was nothing political or racist or sexist in the intention of the artist in choosing to create these images. Quite the contrary, he is known to me as a man who deeply honored things relating to the American Indian, especially in art, and he had no agenda regarding demeaning women, or implicating the Natives in doing so. I, therefore, propose that we make every effort to develop positive approaches to resolving this

sensitive matter. The negative approach – that of removing or hiding historic public art which is the heritage of us all, male, female, Native and others alike, and which is protected by law to be available to us all—does not seem particularly satisfactory as a way of responding to the just concerns of all sides in this matter. I wonder if we might not think in terms of supporting rather than silencing artists’ voices, including not only those of the disputed murals but also those of Native artists both male and female..

In effect, my idea is to use this as an opportunity to present alternatives to the themes of hostile encounter between Indians and whites that Mechau explored. I envision an initiative to solicit Native artwork and exhibit it in the Ariel Rios building if possible in the vicinity of the murals, perhaps as a rotating opportunity for Native artists to get broader recognition. This feels particularly fitting, as it was the government’s endeavor to support artists in the first place, which generated the murals. Yet as far as I know artists from Native peoples did not receive mural commissions for the Ariel Rios Building, and for whatever reason did not have a fair chance to benefit from government largess at the time of the WPA mural projects. Perhaps we can make up for this injustice by providing an opportunity for Native artists—men and women—to have their own “shot at government and public support”...no violence intended!

The art submitted might be selected or judged perhaps by Native people themselves. Just as was true for the Mechau murals in their time, the art displayed would be expected to meet current standards of appropriate propriety and political correctness that prevail in the modern world of art in this country. At the same time, it would be a chance for the Native people’s expression of their version of our shared present and/or past (even future) to be supported as was the privilege of the New Deal artists. The GSA’s art division could administer the program.

As a consultant to The Boston Foundation’s Emily Tuckerman Allen Fund, I can commit a sum towards this endeavor, available through a public non-profit entity. I would envision it as a challenge grant to be matched with funds from other sources. Thus, this painful deadlock could be transformed into a project that would accomplish some positive good by establishing an ongoing exhibit of Indian art. This initiative should address or redress some of the concerns, and perhaps right some of the past wrongs, felt by those complaining about the murals. At the same time it would do no violence to the murals but leave them intact for interpretation, appreciation, and discussion both from the standpoint of art and history.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas this Christmas night, in hopes that this conflict will soon disappear!